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ABSTRACT

Women who are able to acknowledge their distinctive perceptions and to relate them to their lives are the ones most likely to expose the oppressiveness of a power-driven society. Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictional character, Hester Prynne ("The Scarlet Letter") illustrates a crucial theme: a woman's faculty for critical awareness and her ability to reflect on the biases that have restricted her development. It is when women are in extraordinary circumstances that they are able to break free from these imposed constraints. Historically, responsible behavior has not been expected of women, and women have consequently been excused for criminal behavior because of their supposed childlike innocence. Women scholars are doing vital research showing the subservient and depersonalized experiences of women workers. Women in fiction also indicate the role struggle that has been going on for over a century. The time factor is important, for although there is a need to look and move forward, both men and women should remember the past and renounce it in such a way as to open the alternative possibilities of relationship and mutual concern. (FG)

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Women's Vantage Points and New Realities: A Philosophic Viewing

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne survives in most people's memories even today. She is the woman who is pilloried and imprisoned for committing adultery in Puritan Boston, who is sentenced to wear the scarlet 'A' for the rest of her life. When she is released, she goes to live at the shore on the outskirts of town, apart from what she perceives to be a wholly hostile world. Alone with her child, she is no longer dependent on society; the world's law is no longer "a law for her mind." She imbibes an emancipatory spirit, common enough in Europe at the time, "but which our forefathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter." In her speculations, Hester begins to wonder about "the whole race of womanhood." She ponders:

> Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative.... A tendency to speculation, though it may keep woman quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad.

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> She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by an exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish. Thus, Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind. (1)

Consider what happens in that paragraph. What Carol Gilligan calls "the woman's voice"[2] is heard, even through the mediation of a male artist. It is the voice of the excluded and oppressed, of one who--<u>because</u> she is oppressed--can see the arbitrariness and inequities of a society in which so many are submerged. She can see how interwoven the exploitation of women is with the very nature of society; she can also see that male constructs are so habitual that they are confused with what is "natural" and unarguably true. But then the male author's construct seems to intervene: having turned to thought, it is suggested, a woman must leave passion and feeling behind. Indeed, he said earlier that (in "<u>perhaps</u> the truest theory") she who has "once been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration." The

"magic touch," of course, would be that of a lover; and, under that touch, the difficult problems might dissolve. The heart, in other words, the defining female principle is generally thought to atrophy when the mind becomes speculative and free. But this "perhaps" was true, Hawthorne said with his usual duplicity, meaning something entirely different. As the novel works out, passion and mind indeed come together when Hester, briefly reunited with her lover, urges him to break with his own powerlessness, to "Preach! Act! Write!," to start on a new life somewhere else along with her. And, throughout the story, Hester--critical and speculative as she continues to be--works as a nurse and a good Samaritan in Boston, constructing the world around her (hostile though it may be in its official guise) in terms of care.

I begin with that because it seems to me to hold multiple intimations of themes to be pursued. Crucial among them is the theme of critical awareness: the capacity to reflect, not only upon the lived situation, but on the ways in which male biases with respect to women obscure what may happen in their development, especially when they find themselves in unusual circumstances and are (because of necessity or some vital energy within themselves) able to break free. As we have seen, the prevalent "theory" in Hester's day made it impossible for men to acknowledge that an emancipated thinker like Hester Prynne would be compassionate enough and caring enough to be called "our Hester" by the poor, the sick, the anguished within the town. It made it impossible for them to imagine that a woman would be able to summon up the strength

and critical understanding to identify openings in a limiting situation considered hopeless by a frightened and powerless male, in this case the Reverend Dimmesdale, whom Hester continues to love. Perhaps equally important is the way in which Hester's mothering proceeds in a space quite other than that of the traditional family, where the "reproduction of mothering"[3] would normally occur. Little Pearl is an "elf-child" and remains an elf-child, even though she refuses to come to her mother when Hester removes the scarlet letter for a moment, takes off her confining cap, and allows herself to become a sex object in the woods. When the child is grown and is left money, she finds a home in some unknown region far from the restrictive community. And, later, Hester is seen embroidering a baby-garment, "with such a lavish richness of golden fancy as would have raised a public tumult, had any infant, thus apparelled, been shown to our sober-hued community." The suggestion is that Pearl, having escaped the ordinary socialization, herself gives birth to a child (whose gender is not noted) who can be assumed to be free.

Hester spends much of her later life counselling "wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring" women, telling them that when the world is ripe for it, "a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness."[4] It is true that she does not succeed in remaking society, although she had once hoped to do so; but she does tell people there will be a brighter period--one, clearly, without oppression, marked

by gold threads and by joy. And that leads to the main point I wish to make: that women who are able to tell their own stories, who can acknowledge their distinctive perceptions and distinctive constructions are the ones most likely to expose the oppressiveness of a power-driven society; and, if they come together with others in a we-relation, in a coalition founded in sisterhood and shared concern, they are the ones most likely to renew.

It is noteworthy that Hawthorne began his novel a year after the proclamation of the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions at Seneca Falls in New York, that Declaration modelled after the Declaration of Independence,[5] but aimed on this occasion <u>against</u> "mankind." Focused on women's rights as persons, the Declaration drew particular attention to the fact that responsible behavior was not expected of women, since they possessed no legal identity separate from their husbands'. This meant that they were not held responsible for crimes committed in their husbands' presence or with their consent. In consequence, they often failed to develop into responsible adults. Conceived to be "innocent," as children were innocent, their weakness and powerlessness were confirmed.[6] (In the case of Hester Prynne, the very ambivalence shown with respect to her crime is evidence of this. Her mistake is at one point attributed to the fact that she had been left to her own "misguidance" in the absence of her husband. At another point, it is explained that she is being spared the penalty of death because she is "youthful and fair, and doubtless was strongly tempted to her fall...." This is one of many examples of the oppressiveness of

forgiveness or what masquerades as "understanding." In neither case is Hester treated as a fully responsible, adult human being.)

Arguments with respect to rights ordinarily are grounded in a conception of the person as a free and rational agent. As a person, the individual is endowed with certain "option rights"; there is a sphere of freedom in which he/she is free to choose.[7] In some sense, the person so conceived exists outside of time, like Immanuel Kant's rational agent who was to be treated always as an end and never as a means.[8] Also, that person and the rights he/she possessed had primary meaning in a public space, where human beings (ordinarily male, of course) could come together in speech and action, be together in contractual relations, engage in voting and decision-making beyond the grip of biological necessity.[9]

For all the traditionally liberal individualism of the writers of the Seneca Falls Declaration, they clearly recognized two important limitations where women were concerned: first, the deliberate infantilization of women, the refusal to grant them legal status, the refusal to permit their growth as rational beings existing in the sphere of freedom; secondly, the assignment of women to a special, specifically domestic sphere, a private sphere beyond the public space. They could not, therefore, content themselves with an appeal to the timeless or the transcendent view of women as persons. It was not only that women were deliberately excluded from the sphere where rights were acted upon and autonomy affirmed; they were prevented, as it were, from <u>appearing</u> as the persons and free agents to whom the notion of rights applied.

Even the Seneca Declaration, therefore, had to carry a view of women as embedded in a specifically inequitable, oppressive situation. We surely recognize today that there is no essence, no abstract property that defines a woman or a man, no matter how much talk there is of persons or of "God-given" rights. Both have to be understood in a concrete ensemble of relationships. Whatever essence or identity or character is to be posited is constituted over time and in the course of such relationships. Men and women are <u>both</u> embedded; they <u>create</u> themselves by choice of action as they live, choices never disembodied, never "pure."[10]

The far-ranging, courageous work done by AERA's women researchers[11] has disclosed the multiple ways in which that process of constitution or self-creation has been overlooked or distorted where women are concerned. As importantly, the new research has disclosed the mystifications that have perpetuated role-expectations and need-dispositions of specific significance for the post-industrial society. Patricia Campbell, Carol Dwyer, Sue Klein, Carol Tittle, Myra Sadker, and others are exposing once again such myths as those having to do with the effect on the mammary function of intellectual development, with the harm done to children by their mothers choosing to work, with the persisting "proofs" of female inferiority. It is through the research of women scholars that we have been reminded of the effects of perspective and vantage point upon supposedly neutral inquiries, of the values that cannot but permeate the social sciences, especi-

ally when it is recognized that social science is grounded in the same taken-for-granted assumptions that define the system in which it does its presumably "objective" work. Also, it is through current research of women scholars that we have come to recognize the continuing division of the world into public and private realms, and the arbitrary association of women with the so-called private or domestic sphere.

It is important to take into account the history of this divorce of public from private, particularly in our own country. In the days of cottage industry, at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, women shared the work to be done with men and played significant roles in what were frequently extended households. When, however, cottage industry began to give way to the factory system, the men went away from home to workplaces where their labors were strictly separated from anything resembling social life.[12] Their wives, who continued much of the work they had done before, were not prey to the same division of labor; nor was their labor systematized as their husbands' was in the factory. What they did--planting, sewing, quilting, shoemaking, even weaving--began to appear inefficient, unsystematic, playful to the overworked, alienated men who dragged themselves home each night or, more frequently, at the end of each week. And the more systematized, the more exploitative the workplace became, the more home began to appear as a sanctuary or a retreat.

All the talk, usually the sentimental talk, about women as the "moral anchors," the creatures who would reward their husband[s] with "soothing kindness," the refined beings responsible for instructing

"their sons" (as Benjamin Rush put it [13]) "in the principles of liberty," justified and rationalized the identification of women with the special, the domestic sphere. [14] And, as Nancy Chodorow and others have shown us, the family division of labor that resulted produced the gender differences so widely taken for granted today. At once, a particular kind of women's mothering--with all the needs and gratifications associated with it--began to be produced and reproduced. It is relevant to note that the women who went to labor in the factories were, like the common school teachers, unmarried and, almost without exception, called--and treated as--"girls." We are all familiar with the so-called Lowell "mill girls" and the way they were treated (and infantilized) in the factories and the dormitories where they lived. (I am fond of Herman Melville's version of those mills in his story, "The Tartarus of Maids," which deals with a paper-mill full of blue-white girls roaming dark halls, tending iron machines, living a "blank and raggy" life. The narrator asks the proprietor why "in most factories, female operatives, of whatever age, are indiscriminately called girls, never women." The proprietor says it is because they are unmarried and that the factory will not hire married women, that only steady workers are wanted, twelve hours to the day--through the three hundred and sixty-five days, excepting Sunday, Thanksgiving, and Fast-days, and that is why the females there are "rightly called girls." [15]) Impressive in a different way is the Denver superintendent in the mid-19th century who said that, if teachers have advice to give their superior, "it is to be given as the good daughter talks with the father.... The dictation

must come from the other end."[16] My point is that the private sphere was extended to both schools and factories, wherever there were females who never looked forward as men did (according to another schoolman) "to legal emancipation from parental control." It is, obviously, in the public sphere that persons are emancipated. It is only there that they are regarded as free agents, no longer susceptible to control.

In any case, we do not need to be reminded that the increasing depersonalization of workplaces and the increasing alienation experienced by workers reinforced the separation between private and public realms. Karl Marx, in fact, once wrote that the worker feels himself outside his work and, in his work, feels outside himself. "He is at home," he said, "when he is not working, and when he is working, he is not at home."[17] And as alienation and separation increased, the production of children--and the parenting of children and the proper socialization of children into existing social arrangements--became unquestioned functions of that realm where there was no working, that domestic realm, the home.

The personalities produced by the family sustained it; such constructs as dependency sustained it. What were created as "needs" sustained it, as guilt did and fear of failure and loneliness. And men's fantasies sustained it: the persistent fantasies of mother and madonna and goddess and earth mother and whore, always whore. I think of the women (Madame Arnoux, Rosanette, Madame Dambreuse, Madame Moreau) in Gustave Flaubert's A Sentimental Education,[18] that remarkable

novel about the corruptions and illusions of bourgeois life, the obstacles to mutuality and adult love, obstacles set up by money and power and public lies. I think of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's The Awakening,[19] the woman alienated from the "mother-women" all around her, saying she would give up her life for her children but not herself, and (innocent, misled, uneducated) dooming herself to suicide. I think of the narrator of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing,[20] looking through old scrapbooks, finding magazine pictures pasted over the pages: "They were ladies, all kinds: holding up cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modeling high heels and nylons with dark seams and pillbox hats and veils. A lady was what you dressed up as on Halloween when you couldn't think of anything else and didn't want to be a ghost; or it was what you said at school when they asked you what you were going to be when you grew up, and you said 'A lady' or 'A mother,' either one was safe, and it wasn't a lie."

Images from Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye[21] come back to me: that little black girl yearning for a white girl's blue eyes, that ugly little girl who is raped by her father and whose baby dies. At the end, she searches in the garbage and wonders why the marigolds don't grow. The story teller thinks it is the fault of the earth, the land, the town. "I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it

doesn't matter. It is too late. At least on the edge of my town...." The victim has no right, she says. It is not the soil, not the land. Don't we all recognize that? The soil is bad; the land kills of its own volition; we have no rights. And so many continue to acquiesce, in their private gardens, away from the public space where persons might conceivably come together and remake the ground and fertilize the soil.[22] I think, finally, of Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle" and of the old woman with her memories of a struggle for liberation and those other memories she would prefer to overcome ("in Paradise, woman, you will be the footstool of your husband"). I remember her song, "Lift high banner of reason...justice...freedom...light." She wants, in those last years of her life, to be able to live within and not move to the rhythms of others. "To look back and learn what humanizes," she says to herself, "this to teach. To smash all ghettos that divide us--not to go back, not to go back, this to teach...." She had been in a public space when she was young, had been imprisoned because she had fought for freedom; and now, struggling out of the private one last time, she reaches out and says, "justice...freedom... light."

It is necessary for all of us to confront our lived situations, past and present, to see ourselves in those situations, to objectify them, to understand them in their totality and in connection with what is happening in this world. We have to come together more than ever before, I believe, not only in professional networks but in

friendships, comradeships, so that we can work for equity without forgetting what mutuality means. Susan Sontag has said that women cannot liberate themselves without fighting for power--that liberation means power, if it means anything at all. Carolyn Heilbrun speaks, rather, of countervailing power. "Power is like an amoeba," she writes. "Sufficiently jolted by an external particle, it will eventually absorb it and make it part of itself, changing, of course, in the process. Power is self-satisfied. Token women and those men power uses but does not respect, are tools of power. The women or men who fight power are the only ones with effect. Perhaps that is what is meant by the power of the powerless. The token woman, though she may have the delusion of power, is without effect on the world, less consequential than the merest housewife. She works through men, and offers nothing of service to other women. On the scale of power, she is a second-rate man, even if her mind is twice that of her colleagues."[23] Women, Heilbrun believes, must want to be where the power is; they must be urged to enter the world of power, no matter what the cost; but they must want to be there as women, and in large numbers. Obviously (and I think we all believe this), when superior power is used to exploit and oppress women, women must develop sufficient power among themselves to attack and overcome such treatment. But they must also develop possibilities of alternatives; and this is most important when it comes to the true overcoming of inequities.

To think of alternative possibilities, possibilities of mutuality and cooperation and trust, is to look at things as if they

could be otherwise. It implies an essential willingness to break through created structures, to move beyond--and to do so with a sense of some better social order, a better condition of things. I have futuring in mind, and transcendence. I have new beginnings in mind, the taking of initiatives. I am talking about action in the world. Perhaps strangely, I have memory in mind as well: the act of remembering, the kind of remembering we can feel in Tillie Olsen's old woman, the kind of memory that may become an enemy of power. In a novel called The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,[24] Milan Kundera has recently written of all the people forbidden to remember in Czechoslovakia: the historians, the musicians. And he speaks of the myriad voices of silence. As is well known, if people are forced to forget Czech thought, Czech art, Czech philosophy, Czech music, there will be no Czechoslovakia. I find an analogy here for our memories of the relatedness and connectedness in which, as Carol Gilligan's interviews suggest,[25] most women's lives begin.

She talks about the morality of responsibility women describe, about the ways in which they constitute their worlds in terms of care and concern. She attributes this to their early experiences of connectedness with their mothers, in contrast to male children's early experiences of individuation and separation. Women's sense of integrity, Gilligan has learned, is entwined with an ethic of care, "so that to see herself as a woman is to see herself in a relationship of connection."[26] When women reach adulthood, it appears that--at least for those who are able to free themselves from the wish for others' approval--there is a

redefinition of care, permitting an ethic of responsibility to emerge and become a self-chosen anchor of personal integrity. It also appears that certain male individuals, released by experiences of intimacy at midlife, may move from a focus on individual achievement and success to the kind of understanding that actually makes possible relationship and care.

There are two aspects of this work that hold particular interest for me. One has to do with the likelihood that integration or "generativity" for both male and female may give rise to a fusion of justice and love. This suggests that it does not involve a groundless hope to look forward to increasing mutuality between men and women if existing power arrangements can be to some extent revised, if women--in their networks and alliances--can somehow countervail. This does not mean an abandonment of sexual experience and sexual love, as I see it. I am much concerned, for example, about men's fears of women's sexual power, fears rooted in early awarenesses (perhaps) of mystery and forbidden depths. I am concerned about their defensiveness with respect to it, their desire to contain it (as demonstrated in the anti-abortion passion felt by so many public men). I do not think that women ought to give up any of their sexual power or their sexual freedom; but I do think that, in the sexual realm, as in the professional realm, we ought to look forward to and try reflectively to bring about a renunciation of power on both sides. It ought to be the kind of renunciation that opens up alternative possibilities of relationship and shared experience and mutual concern.

Our desire for equity, our warranted struggles for justice,

our insistence on the repair of persisting deficiencies and neglect: none of these ought to mean that we are willing to buy into, as it were, the professional and political worlds as they exist. Which one of us, after all, would be willing to say that we would choose self-interest over human rights, or that economic factors might outweigh our feelings about apartheid? Which one of us would be willing to accept without critique the erosion of compassion for the poor people in this country, the pregnant women, the minorities, the aliens, the handicapped? Which one of us would be willing to return, as this administration seems to be doing, to a 19th or even an 18th century view of freedom: freedom from regulation and support, as well as control? As I see it, it is a view of freedom founded on a conception of a cowboy, a J.R., a gun-totin' frontiersman worrying, above all else, that his rights will be violated. No....

And that leads me to another aspect of Gilligan's work--her view that the morality of rights is a function of a male perspective, as is its predication on equality and the notion of justice as fairness. She says that "while the ethic of rights is a manifestation of equal respect, balancing the claims of self and other, the ethic of responsibility generates instead the understanding that gives rise to compassion and care. Thus the counterpoint of identity and intimacy that marks the time between childhood is articulated through two different moralities whose complementarity is the discovery of maturity."[27] I would emphasize the notion of complementarity and make the point that much depends, once again, on the breaking down of barriers between public and private spheres,

altering the roles now defined by the existing sex-gender system, affirming parenting and working as well in an entirely different light.

Nancy Chodorow ends her book by saying that change will occur, although the outcomes are uncertain. "The elimination of the present organization of parenting in favor of a system of parenting in which both men and women are responsible would be a tremendous social advance."[28] The philosopher, Virginia Held, speaks of the possibility of basic transformations, the ends of which must be their means: "the replacement of relations based on power by relations of mutual concern and respect.... A society of mutual concern and respect will not be a society that could have been brought about by violence.... If men will in fact rule by power and dominate women forever, they will end by destroying us all--and if that happens, the society we want to see will only be a construction of the imagination, no more--and we will all get on with the state of war or armed truce we already live in anyway."[29] Carolyn Heilbrun says: "The past is male. But it is all the past we have. We must use it, in order that the future will speak of womanhood, a condition full of risk, and variety, and discovery: in short, human."[30]

Let us think back to Hester Prynne again--and her hope and her broken dream. And, finally, let the poet speak:

> What would happen if one woman told the
> truth about her life?
> The world would split open. (31)

And then it is up to us, if we can stand together, to tell our truths, to bring the severed parts together, to countervail, to transform.

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